

The Essentials of a National System for  
Rehabilitation of Disabled Service  
Men of the American Forces

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A Statement Presented to the Committee  
on Education of the House of  
Representatives, March 31, 1920

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Greenwich, Connecticut

THE ARBOR PRESS

1920

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OCT. 8. 1920

20-22990

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## The Essentials of a National System for Rehabilitation of Disabled Ser- vice Men of the American Forces

WHAT constitutes a sound system of rehabilitation for disabled soldiers? Fortunately, there is now a considerable body of experience to draw upon for assistance in answering this question.

At the time the United States entered the war the other belligerent nations had for several years been experimenting with methods of provision for disabled men. The most obvious errors had been discovered and corrected, and the systems were becoming stabilized. .

The United States had, in addition to the experience at its disposal, time in which to prepare to discharge its responsibilities to disabled soldiers. Whereas the first disabled soldiers appeared on the streets of London and Paris two or three months after the outbreak of hostilities, a consequential number of our crippled soldiers did not come through the military hospi-

tals to the stage when they would be ready for economic rehabilitation until two years after our declaration of war. So, in spite of the delay of 12 or 13 months in giving the Federal Board for Vocational Education notice of its responsibility in this field, the time was still adequate for preparation.

The temper of Congress was most generous in dealing with questions affecting disabled soldiers. All of the money asked for this cause (in one instance more than was requested) has been appropriated, and reasonable demands for legislative authority have been met. It was certainly the intention of Congress that the disabled American service man should be dealt with generously and capably.

What, then, are the essential elements in the plan of rehabilitation which should have been and, indeed, still should be worked out?

1. The first requisite is sufficient money with which to do the job. There has been no handicap of a financial character in this country. The French, for example, saw many

rehabilitation features which they would have liked to carry through, but funds were not available. It is not enough to offer disabled soldiers training courses, for unless support for them and their families can be provided they can not take advantage of the opportunities. For this maintenance colossal appropriations are requisite, but they have been forthcoming.

2. The second item is organization. It is patent that the disabled soldier in Wyoming should be dealt with in essentially the same way as his injured company mate from New Jersey. This requires national organization which must be directed from Washington. But as the disabled man, after he is through with hospital treatment, wishes above all else to get back home the practical work must be done at a myriad of points throughout the country. The district system of organization is thus indicated, and the Federal board very wisely divided the country into 14 administrative districts. But in its method of admin-

istering those districts it was not so wise.

It should be recalled that the problem is one of human relation, personal and individual. Be there 40,000 or 200,000 disabled soldiers with whom to deal, it may be safely averred that no two cases are alike. Each case calls for an original decision, which some persons or group of persons must make. This situation would call for the establishment of some general rules of practice and some general prohibitions, leaving considerable latitude of judgment to the representative most closely in touch with the individual soldier.

The central office must needs have statistics and records. It must also lay down rules and regulations. But the work must be done in the field and the data sent to Washington for record and possible criticism. It is better that a representative of the board should meet a disabled soldier in Butte, Mont., should study the case, should make a plan with the man, and actually start him in training and



then send a record of the case to Washington, than that the whole matter should be held up pending decision from the central office. Even if the judgment of the local representative is correct but 90 per cent of the time, there is no guaranty that the sapience of the Washington office, which has never seen the soldier, will be greater. One thing is sure, referring all cases for decision to a central point means endless red tape and delay. Delegating the power of decision to the man who actually deals with the soldier is simple and direct as well as logical.

It is an axiom of administration that responsibility and authority engender interest and enthusiasm. Put a job up to a man and the chances are he will do it well. Make him a rubber stamp or a routine clerk and you kill his spirit. Imagine the case of a vocational adviser who has entered the service of the Federal Board with a desire to do everything in his power to help disabled soldiers. Conceive that he has been working hard

on a particular case, that after careful study he has worked out a plan which he is sure will be successful. He has aroused the soldier's ambitions and brought him into the right frame of mind to undertake a course of training.

But the adviser has no authority to do a thing. He makes a recommendation, which goes to Washington and does not return for some time. Meanwhile his enthused soldier friend drops in to see when he can start. The adviser is embarrassed that he can not tell him. Finally the recommendation is returned disallowed, with a notation by some one who has never seen the soldier giving a reason which the adviser knows is silly.

We can imagine what a damper will be put on the enthusiasm of the soldier and the spirit of his friend and adviser. With what energy can we picture the adviser following up and putting through the alternative course of training? And as the character aspect is so much more vital than the technical we can conceive it better that the two individuals were left to work out

the plan they created and for which they were responsible.

If local representatives were given authority to act, it is clear they should report their action in every case to the Washington office for record, for criticism, for possible review. But meantime something would be under way. And if the central office was snowed under and became months late in review of the cases no grievous injury would be done the disabled soldiers.

With delegation of authority should go grant of funds. Each local office should have a fund to meet immediate requirements, making expenditures (governed, of course, by the regulations), obtaining vouchers, and forwarding these to Washington with a complete accounting, so that the local fund could be reimbursed.

Such district organization makes it necessary for the director to train and imbue with correct principles for the work the 14 regional chiefs alone. These men would each deal with their representatives in the cities within

their districts. These latter would break in their assistants, and so on likewise down the line.

Consider the organization of Red Cross home service, which must be considered one of the greatest achievements of the American people during the war. Literally hundreds of thousands of cases of American soldiers and their families were handled with dispatch, wisdom, and satisfaction. Yet never a single case was decided in Washington. The central office determined the principles of the work, laid down restrictions, audited accounts. Had the cases been referred to Washington, there is no building large enough to house the force of clerks that would have been required.

When the soldier's relative came for assistance the case was studied, the decision reached, and action taken the same day. Mistakes? Possibly some. But there certainly was service prompt enough to be of some use. And it was not hit or miss. The worker making the decision had been

trained by instructors from headquarters; he or she was constantly guided by advice or rulings from the same source.

When a home-service worker was crowded with work, two assistants were broken in. Later, these assistants trained others. With such a system a thousand cases or a million cases could be cared for with equal ease. And the Washington headquarters were never unduly rushed. The officials there always had time to consider the larger aspects of the work and to strive for further improvement.

3. The most vital factor of all is the caliber of personnel. In this any Government bureau is hampered by limitation of salary scale and civil service formalities. But as we look back to the beginning of the Federal Board's work we recall the generosity with which service and facilities were offered it in the interest of the disabled soldier. The best men in the country would have given a share of their time to serve on boards or com-

mittees. Many would have given full-time service either at Washington or in the cities where they lived. No such willingness was availed of. So instead of having the "biggest" men in the communities throughout the country identified with its work the board was limited to men whom it could hire for salaries ranging from \$2,000 to \$4,000.

In only one instance was any volunteer advice or assistance accepted, namely, in the appointment at the suggestion of the National Tuberculosis Association of an advisory committee on tuberculosis cases. This committee worked faithfully but the Federal Board paid very little attention to its recommendations.

Volunteer work used to be regarded with disfavor but during the war it was demonstrated that it could be made efficient. In the best organizations volunteer workers were "hired" and "discharged" on the same basis as paid employees. There was no subject in which such intense interest was demonstrated as the future of the

disabled soldier, and the Federal Board could have built up a splendid corps.

Leaving the consideration of volunteer service out of the question however, there are two ways in which men may be employed. The one is to get a good man, give him his instructions, and then allow him free hand to do his work. Every good executive follows this method, checking the results very carefully, of course, and discharging the man if he fails, but not annoying him constantly with petty interference. The remuneration to a good man under such circumstances is part in salary, but part in the creative satisfaction which he takes in his work. The second way is to use a man as a clerk and give him no authority and no responsibility. No really worth while man will keep such a job at any salary, and those who can be obtained are such as work for salary alone. Yet it is the second policy which was adopted by the Federal Board and a number of competent men have resigned by reason of it.

Members of a rehabilitation staff should be selected from varied lines. Particularly should those with experience in social work—which is only another name for character and personal problem work—be sought. The Federal Board has restricted its recruiting too largely to teachers.

Another requirement is that district representatives be themselves residents of and familiar with the territories they are to cover. The average New Yorker would, for example, feel lost in the Northwest, and a Yankee is certainly not the one to send to New Orleans to deal there with both whites and negroes. The local staffs can best be locally recruited.

The failure to use women in the contact work with soldiers was a great mistake. Leaving out of consideration the principle involved, it is a fact that for a given salary there can be employed a higher type of woman than man. And women are peculiarly apt for a human job of this kind.

Inasmuch as the task of the Federal



Board is to meet a character problem much more than a vocational problem, the question of personnel is of the most vital importance.

4. The next consideration is method of work. The most important factor is that the attitude toward the disabled soldier should be active rather than passive. Representatives of the board should seek out soldiers and an adviser should act in the capacity of attorney for an individual man to see that he gets the benefits that Congress intended him to have. Instead of taking the attitude of an insurance examiner who puts the burden of proof on the claimant there should rather be the spirit of the family lawyer who seeks diligently for the missing nephew in order to convey to him the estate bequeathed to him by an uncle.

The work should all be done through personal contact. Letter writing is beyond many men who could very clearly tell their story verbally. And as half the job conferred upon the Federal Board was selling the proposi-

tion of rehabilitation, contact work in the field should have been regarded as a primary essential. The up-to-date business knows its prospective customers can be landed more surely by the personal call of a salesman than by mailing of printed matter. If the disabled soldier does not answer a notice he should be called on at his home, followed up if his address was changed, and brought into the fold.

5. The next question concerns the place and manner of training, the principal difference of opinion being as to whether the disabled soldier should be sent to some regular trade school or to a special school for disabled men in general or for disabled soldiers. All the experience of our allies pointed to the necessity for special schools. The difficulties of depending upon existing educational facilities were: (a) There are practically no trade schools for full-grown men; (b) an adult feels embarrassed attending an industrial school or business college with young boys and girls; (c) the teachers in regular schools are

not familiar with the special educational difficulties involved with cases of physical handicap; (*d*) what the teachers do learn from mistakes and experience is not cumulative for the benefit of other disabled men, because the soldier pupils are too scattered; and (*e*) in a standard institution doing its regular work the individual attention and constant mental bolstering and encouragement that an injured man requires can not be provided. In a special school the subjects of instruction, the staff, the methods, the hours, and régime are all planned for the special type of pupil.

Although Canada, Great Britain, France, Belgium, and Italy had all found special schools for disabled soldiers to be necessary to successful work, the Federal Board, in its wisdom, determined upon a course diametrically opposite.

6. Mechanism of rehabilitation calls next for consideration; so far as the soldier is concerned this comprises three stages: (*a*) Field work by "sleuths" who run down the disabled

men to put them in touch with their opportunities; (b) personal advice regarding plans for the future, choice of training, etc., and (c) follow up during and after the course of training to see if the plan is working out as expected, to smooth over difficulties, and so far as possible to assure ultimate success in the return to civilian life.

Promptness of action is of particular importance. A man can very quickly drift into habits of idleness or become discouraged and enter a blind-alley occupation. At the beginning of rehabilitation work in this country, the point most emphasized by advisers from abroad was that there should not be a week's delay in starting the disabled soldier on his way. Of course, the only way to attain speed is to decentralize authority, putting it locally in the hands of high-grade men.

7. Yet overdoing the matter is to be avoided. The indiscriminate award of long courses where they are not required, the loose distribution of

Government money in maintenance allowances, may be prejudicial to the real interests of the disabled men. It is a great mistake, for example, to have men take easy courses a couple of years in length, for they become lazy and get into the habit of depending on the Government for their support. In Canada, for example, they have taken great pains to prevent pauperization of the men.

When the Federal Board has come under fire, its reaction has been to put cases through by the hundreds and to grant courses by the wholesale. What the disabled soldiers needed instead was more personal attention. If high-grade effort were put on every case, the solution in many instances would be found without necessity for a long and expensive training course.

8. An essential in any successful system of rehabilitation is a strong and effective program of public education relative to the real needs of the disabled soldier, the right attitude toward him on the part of the public, the employer, his family, etc. With

the generous cooperation offered by the newspapers, the magazine press, the moving-picture producers, etc., a splendid campaign would have been possible. But the Federal Board has accomplished almost nothing along this line.

This memorandum has endeavored to set forth some of the features of a rehabilitation system which are of positive importance. What has been the success in other countries with the same work?

It is true that all the countries have encountered difficulties, but many of them were due to the necessity for sailing an uncharted sea, with no previous experience to observe and follow. There is space for consideration of but one system, and that from the aspect of the disabled soldier.

The injured British soldier is discharged from military hospital and goes at once to his own home. Before he gets his discharge he receives a card advising him to call on the local war pensions committee in his own town; that this body will look out for his

needs. When he gets home he goes to the office of the committee on a Tuesday, let us say, and meets the executive secretary, a paid officer placed in the job by the national pensions ministry. He is asked to come back Wednesday afternoon when the members of the committee will be meeting so that he can talk over with them his own situation. Meantime he may be asked to see the medical adviser of the committee so that there shall be ready a report on his physical condition.

The committee is made up of some of the most useful members of the community, serving without pay. It comprises possibly a couple of manufacturers, one educator, a minister, a labor representative, and surely a few women. The soldier talks over his case with the committee or with a delegated number of members. These members know the community, the industrial possibilities, the employers in the various lines. Doubtless one or more of them knows the soldier or his family. So they advise him and, at

once, if possible, determine upon the plan he is to pursue. His degree of disability under the regulations given them is decided, and the executive secretary is in a position that day to start paying him a pension. They award what is called an "interim" pension, which is reported to London, and which is subject to revision if headquarters objects. But meanwhile the man is not left penniless.

If training is determined upon as wise, the soldier can start the next day and, again, the local officer can start paying his tuition and the maintenance allowance for himself and dependents. The course decided upon, its length, and probable cost is reported to London, and, of course, the choice is guided by certain regulations issued to the local committees from time to time. As with the pension, London may, but seldom does, cut down the length of the course. But meantime the man has made a start.

Individual members of the committee make themselves responsible



for keeping in touch with a certain number of the soldiers, visiting their families, etc. This provides follow up of the best type.

The payments mentioned are made from an "imprest" fund, reimbursed from London as expenditure vouchers are sent in.

In large cities there are subcommittees covering different sections of the community.

It is all very simple and direct; and though the working is not perfect, at least the soldier gets action, and is not put off, put off again, and finally disheartened.

The point again to be emphasized, in conclusion, is that the problem of dealing with disabled soldiers is a human problem. It involves the establishment of confidence between two individuals, and the acquaintance with record, personality, and temperament upon which can be based helpful advice for the future. The data of human problems can never be standardized or reduced to forms to be read over and judged by distant officials. Some person must make a decision, and that person must be the one in actual touch with the soldier himself.





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